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ABSTRACT

To determine the progress that adult students in Belfast, Ireland, were making under a literacy tutoring program, questionnaires were sent to all 160 tutors who were involved in the program. The questions dealt with the tutors' backgrounds, their deployment, their views on the organization of the program, and with tutoring processes and results. The reponse rate was 53%. The results indicated that all of the respondents thought their students had learned something and that they were making progress. Specifically, half mentioned progress in learning specific skills; a third mentioned progress in personal, emotional learning or development; while others made general comments on improvement. Suggestions for improvements were made in the areas of teaching specific skills, finding materials suitable in content and structure for adults, having more contact with other tutors, and relating to students. A core curriculum was suggested that would have objectives aimed at developing general learning skills in the adult literacy students. (MKM)

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Helping Adults to Read - Do We Succeed?

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Progress in reading can be taken to mean stages in the advance of the individual towards the objective of being a mature efficient reader. The mature efficient reader can formulate purposes, select, survey, propose a reading plan, skim, scan, decode using different strategies, understand on different levels, evaluate, assimilate and use what he reads from the mass of printed material available in the modern world (Moyle, 1974; Merritt, 1975). Each of these abilities implies certain skills such as those outlined by Carroll (1972) which have usually been defined through analyses of models of the reading process (e.g. Davis, 1971).

Until very recently, all except a tiny minority of those being taught to read were children at school. Their teachers are trained to encourage the development of the skills outlined above as a means of helping the children to become readers. Most children do become readers, though we are not certain of the contribution made by the actual teaching of skills. The teaching of reading skills has, however, been one of the most heavily emphasised elements in the training of tutors for the 100,000-plus adult literacy students who have come forward between October 1975 and July 1977 (ALRA,1977). The question arises whether the transmission of these skills alone will be sufficient to help an adult to learn to read - especially when it is borne in mind that he did not pick up the skills first time round. Could there be other, equally important, factors to which tutors-trainers and organisers, educationalists and psychologists should be giving more attention? Some of these factors might arise from the fact that these students are adult, others might relate to their special needs which derive from their failure to learn to read at school. Pinpointing such factors could be important for the satisfactory progress of the individual student, for the training of tutors and for the organisation of literacy schemes in general.

Preparation of tutors.

The tutors who undertake to help adults with reading should be sensitive to any elements in the past experience and personality of the students which could affect their performance in the present learning situation. As well as this they need to be aware of differences between adults and children in the learning situation, as these will influence the methods and contents of their teaching. These factors have been recognised in all of the material produced during the current literacy campaign for the training of tutors (ALRA, 1975, 1976,1977a,b,c,d; BAS, 1976; BBC,1975; RTE,1977). The way in which the tutors themselves are instructed and the methods which they are encouraged to use with students spring from the philosophy and experiences of adult education (Elsdon,1975; Kidd,1974; Rogers,1974); they are based on the principles of androgogy as opposed to those of pedagogy (Knowles, 1973). Thus, for example, it is realised that in the context of adult literacy, skills cannot be taught and practised in isolation, they must be firmly linked with knowledge and materials which will be useful in themselves; account must also be taken of motivation, or the will to apply knowledge and skills. Teaching in adult literacy involves influencing consciously the acquisition not only of skills, but of knowledge and also of attitudes in both tutor and student.

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In Belfast, as in many other parts of the United Kingdom (ALRA,1977) tutors are required to attend a training course before they start giving tuition. The objectives of training courses would include the following:

- to help tutors develop a set of attitudes towards literacy which will be helpful to them in planning and evaluating their work;
- to equip them with some basic knowledge of the theory of reading processes;
- to encourage the development of sensitivity towards the needs of students, practical and psychological;
- to provide them with some techniques to use in helping students to learn;
- to stimulate in them an openness towards learning so that they will learn from their experiences and be flexible in their methods.

Particular attention is usually given to three areas in which students have been found to need help:

i) decoding and reading skills - the development of visual memory for sight vocabulary acquisition using length, configuration, initial letter and meaning as cues; the development of auditory discrimination and later auditory/visual discrimination and memory for sound-symbol relationships; awareness of language patterns so that language-experience and context-cueing techniques can be utilised; and an introduction to structural patterns within words to help with word attack; attention to higher order skills is also urged from the beginning.

ii) attitudes - many students are lacking in self-confidence and may even be socially withdrawn because they feel inferior and handicapped by their inability to cope with everyday printed materials. Tutors are encouraged to cater for the students' need to feel that they are meeting with success in order to keep motivation high. This has consequences for objectives, methods and materials. It also has consequences for progress - students may not know how to learn, they may have had unfortunate experiences in learning situations in the past and may even be victims of Merritt's 'reading neurosis' (Merritt, 1972). These problems can possibly be overcome where the student is encouraged to make a contribution and to share responsibility for decisions on objectives, methods, materials and evaluation. He will be assisted towards independence through the development of a working partnership with his tutor which will need careful nurturing.

iii) materials - consideration of the printed matter with which we have to cope in everyday life. The student will have to learn how and where to find it, how to select what he needs from it, and how to use it. Items here could include printed forms, notices, lists, instructions, road signs, menus, timetables, directories as well as magazines, papers and books. Tutors are encouraged to become aware of what is available and what may be necessary in the daily lives of their students if various role obligations (Merritt, 1975) are to be fulfilled satisfactorily. They are given means of assessing the readability level of materials both by the use of formulae and in a more comprehensive way taking into account not only vocabulary, sentence structure and word recognition difficulties, but the interest level for particular students.

The Students.

Progress will depend however, not only on the tutors' preparation but on that of the students for the task. Students who come forward for literacy tuition in Belfast, as in other centres in Great Britain (Kedney, 1975) are interviewed individually by the organiser. Information on the student's background, motivation and the reasons why he feels he had not learned to read at school are obtained as well as an assessment of his level of attainment in reading, writing and spelling. Standardised measures are not used in Belfast for two main reasons: existing measures relate to children and should be interpreted with caution when applied to adults (Daly, 1977); they may not be meaningful or helpful; there is also a very strong reluctance to expose a student at his first interview to a potentially threatening situation where he may be faced with his failures and may be demoralised to the extent that he will not return for tuition. After the interview, students are directed to a literacy centre of their choice where the teacher-tutor in charge assigns a voluntary tutor and gives him or her details of the student's initial needs. Tuition in Belfast takes place mainly in centres under the supervision of paid teacher-tutors, one or two per centre. Students are expected to attend twice a week.

The assessment of what is achieved.

Apart from the small Liverpool study (Liverpool, 1976) which found that trained tutors were more effective more quickly, no published evaluation seems to be available of the efficacy of present tutor-training schemes. There are, admittedly, differing circumstances, arising from differing needs or past experiences in the tutors or students which could determine a variety of training needs so that training might not be standard (Risman, 1976). But if we take as a criterion of effectiveness the progress of the students, some indication of the appropriateness of content and methods in tutor training courses should become apparent. Assessment of student progress in the absence of standardised measures is also difficult - though the results of the current NFER study may eventually help here (ALRA, 1977e). It is possible however in the meantime, that tutors who are appropriately prepared and who give tuition to a particular student over a period of time, would be able to highlight areas of improvement, strengths and weaknesses as well as particular difficulties. From this one could deduce whether changes were necessary in tutor training or in the general organisation which might increase the likelihood of more satisfactory progress.

Issues for investigation here.

a) Do students appear to make progress with the methods and approach used by tutors? (There was some degree of standardisation here, since all the tutors in the sample had been trained by the same person).
b) In which areas to they appear to make progress? (i.e. which areas of training were being found most useful?)
c) Were the tutors encountering difficulties which they felt might be retarding progress? If so, of what kind?

Method

A questionnaire was sent in August 1977 with the assistance of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies, Queen's University Belfast, and with the consent of the local literacy organiser to all 160 tutors who were known to have been involved in tuition since attending training courses between October 1975 and April 1977. There were 20 questions, dealing with tutors'

background, their deployment, their views on the organisation of the scheme, and tuition processes and results. The response rate was 53%, acceptable for a postal survey. A detailed report was given to the local organiser with conclusions and recommendations arising from the findings. This paper is based on the responses which gave information relevant to the questions about progress detailed above.

Results

a) Do students make progress? (Questions 11,12,14)

All the respondents thought that their students had learned something. This could be interpreted as progress, and is supported by the responses to the questions about tutor satisfaction where 78% of the respondents mentioned progress as a source of satisfaction to themselves. However the answers to the question about what tutors themselves learned revealed that about 20% of the respondents thought that progress was slow, with the implication that it was slower than might have been expected.

b) In what areas do they appear to make progress? (Question 11)

Responses to this question fell into three groups:

i) Specific skills: among those mentioned were basic sight vocabulary, social sight words, own name and address, use of capital and lower case letters, sounds of individual letters blending sounds, breaking up words, 'silent e' rule, reading a first simple book, progress through a reading series, methods of attacking big words, looking at endings, beginning to think about grammar, finding hymns in a hymn book, spelling. About 50% of the respondents were represented in this group.

ii) Personal-emotional learning: responses grouped under this heading included increased confidence, increased motivation through the discovery of pleasure in reading, through enjoyment of stories, through the discovery of the usefulness of reading; increased ability to concentrate, greater confidence in own ability to learn, in own ability to help self, in own skills; increased interest and pleasure in learning; greater courage in attempting new things. About 33% of the respondents mentioned items in this category.

iii) General: these were non-specific comments, but still positive about progress - 'improving reading ability', 'increased vocabulary', 'increased general knowledge', 'greater sensitivity towards words', 'greater comprehension'.

c) Were the tutors encountering difficulties which they felt might be retarding progress? If so, of what kind? (Questions 12,13,15,17).

Although 28% of the respondents said that they had found no difficulties in the teaching situation, there were suggestions for improvements both in that area and in other areas relating to tuition from many of the respondents. These were of three main kinds:

i) Specific skills: these included phonics, spelling, perceptual problems, lack of grammar vocabulary, the teaching of grammar.

ii) 'Concrete' difficulties: these were mainly due to lack of materials suitable in content and structure for adults. Some respondents mentioned that they found the physical environment of the centres depressing.

iii) Difficulties arising from psychological causes: these fell into two groups

a) relating to tutors - the need for more support, for opportunities to communicate with other tutors, supervisors and organiser was expressed by 43% of tutors in response to question 15, and again by 34% in response to question 17. Suggestions here included more inservice meetings, and the production of a newsletter to keep people informed of developments.

b) relating to students - an impression of lack of effort through perhaps an insufficient realisation on the part of the student of what was required, although motivation was acknowledged to be high. Respondents mentioned items like the difficulty of impressing on a student the need to work at home, outside the class situation, the difficulty of getting him to stop talking and work, of accepting the need to overlearn so as to make responses automatic, of persuading the student to try and conquer his nerve. Some tutors thought that students' absences - perceived by them as being more frequent than tutor absences - though often excusable for practical reasons, were related to a failure on the part of the students to realise the effort and consistent attention required if literacy skills were to be acquired. This had obvious consequences for progress and the development of working relationships.

Discussion

a) How reliable are the comments on students' progress? (a and b above)

Although the questions from which the results were obtained were open-ended, space and time were not limitless. The respondents were asked to reply to 20 questions covering both sides of a page. The space allocated for replies to each open-ended question permitted the inclusion of three or four pithy points but discouraged long-windedness. It was hoped that respondents would give instances which were outstanding in their experience. Homogeneity of responses would perhaps have indicated homogeneity of need among students, or else that tutors were uniformly selective in what they noticed. Variety of responses might indicate variety of need, suspected but not previously documented in Belfast.

The replies showed in fact that there was a wide variety of need, ranging from absolute beginners (about 10% of the total number of students, a figure supported by the impressions of the Belfast organiser from his interviews). It was interesting that the acquisition of reading skills (excluding spelling) and the acquisition of confidence and positive attitudes ranked about equal in the responses. Since respondents gave only one answer to question 11, there was no overlap. While it was hoped that all students made progress in each of these areas, it seems from the responses that gains in one area were greater for some students while others made more obvious gains in another. It would seem also that some students needed a boost in self-confidence before they could begin to learn anything else. The variety of skills mentioned by the respondents as having been learned by their students reflects an interest on the part of the tutors in the analysis of the skills and processes involved in reading.

These judgements are subjective and it should be remembered that the tutors were really judging their own performances as much as those of their students. But if tutors or students were dissatisfied, they were encouraged to seek advice individually from the teacher-tutor or organiser so that steps could be taken to remedy the situation. Another indication that progress was being made comes from the fact that all tutors reported some satisfaction from the work.

These responses can be taken to indicate that on the whole the training had prepared the tutors adequately. The area where least was reported in the way of progress was that of the use of materials. This could be explained in part by the difficulties experienced at the beginning of the project in obtaining materials. It could also have been because at the initial stages of tuition, the tutors were more concerned with equipping the students with the basic decoding tools so that they would eventually be able to cope with the other materials with some independence.

c) Difficulties encountered.

i) Specific skills: many of those mentioned were among those alleged to have been learned according to the responses to question 11. But it is clear that many of the tutors would have been happier to be more knowledgeable in methods of teaching specific skills. The timing of training may be relevant here. It has been the practice in Belfast that tutors should complete a 9- or 15-week training course before starting to tutor a student. While methods of teaching specific skills are covered in this course, this may not be done adequately or in a way which was sufficiently practical. Many of the terms and practices are new for the tutors at this stage and it is perhaps difficult for them to see the relevance and to remember enough of what they have been told - even with the help of handouts and printed notes (N.I. Department of Education,1978). Some inservice sessions on specific issues might help to solve this problem by revising perhaps in greater detail and in response to the needs raised by the tutors, the various methods of approaching different skills and materials. This seems to be the practice already in many places (ALRA,1977).

ii) Concrete difficulties: suitable materials were lacking particularly during the first 18 months of the scheme partly because there was not much that was easily obtainable. Advice against using materials prepared for children was strong, but the need for structure within instruction was clearly felt (Moyle,1976). Children's materials are often constructed around a structure of some kind, whether for instructional or recreational reading. Tutors felt overwhelmed by the need both to devise a structure for their particular student, and also to find or manufacture materials to fit the structure and the student. Coping with the learning needs of the adult students led to an examination of what was in common use with slow readers in secondary schools. But the needs, the immediate needs at least, were very different and the quality of the fiction written for this age group seems to be very poor. It is not intellectually stimulating enough for adults and therefore is not motivating. At the early stages of the scheme, few of the teacher-tutors had enough experience with adult learners or with the range of materials which did exist to be able to advise volunteers.

Matters in this area have improved. More materials have been produced (e.g. ALRA; BBC, 1976; BBC, 1977; BBC, 1978; Nolan, 1976 etc.) The logistics of acquiring and storing them have been simplified. The public libraries have increased their stock of suitable materials and an evaluative booklist has been made available (eg. Redfern, 1976; N.I. Dept. of Education, 1977). A

working party is considering the provision and production of locally based material with guidelines for adapting and using accounts of current events reported in the ordinary press.

Nevertheless it remains true that there is room for a good deal of research and experimentation in the provision of suitable material for students of this type. As one of the tutors said in a returned questionnaire: 'the greatest challenge is that of keeping the student satisfied intellectually while teaching him basic skills'.

iii) Difficulties with psychological causes:

a) relating to tutors: the provision of support for the tutors after training was left to the teacher-tutors in the centres. This aspect of their role was not however always made clear to them. It must be said also that many of them in the early stages were tutoring individual students themselves because of a shortage of volunteers, and they simply did not have the time or the energy for anything else. It is possible that their initial training and orientation could have been more explicit, in for example giving guidance on how to direct other people. Perhaps they should have had more experience in teaching adults themselves before being given charge of a centre. But the opportunities were not always there. It could have happened that they were not all happy with their own roles, nor with the situation in which they were working beside volunteers who were not professional teachers. The result was that volunteers felt a need for more contact, a need which they had not found a means of expressing prior to the survey.

The timing, location and general facilities of local centres took little heed of social needs or of how they might affect morale. The support gained from being part of a group during training was dissipated at a time when it could have been most valuable. In normal working conditions, such needs are met by coffee breaks, group and association meetings etc. It would seem essential to build in provision for similar opportunities for communication and contact in this kind of work where the nature and newness of the problems render mutual support very necessary.

b) relating to students; problems mentioned in this area were possibly the most interesting and also the most intractable. Motivation was not lacking - this was commented on by many respondents - but it clearly is not enough in itself for progress to be guaranteed. While some of the students had ascribed their failure to learn to read in the past to lack of motivation at that time, perhaps correctly, this did not mean that the generation of motivation would in itself produce the required results at this stage of their lives. It is possible that lack of motivation at an earlier age could have hindered the development of habits which would have assisted learning - such as concentration (Jensen, 1967; Vernon, 1971), the ability to establish a learning set, to store and retrieve material efficiently. Such habits which are generally acquired by the very fact of being at school, constantly bombarded with requirements necessitating these skills, are not usually given special attention out of the context in which they are exercised. They have become automatic in the mature reader. Their development must surely be of importance in learning to read, but the conditions of instruction for adult literacy students may not be promoting their development.

Under the system of instruction currently in use there is often no explicit structure such as that indicated by the Army School of Education (Kedney, 1976). This is partly because of the newness of the challenge - suitable materials, attractive to lay people and constructed so as to promote progress

along structured lines do not yet exist in any quantity. A wide selection of such materials would be necessary in order to cater for individual needs and tastes.

The other difficulty may be partly accounted for by the stress on keeping motivation high. This often means that immediate needs are catered for, but the general structure tends to be forgotten. The result may be that instruction is 'bitty'. It does not satisfy the student who, even if he had urgent immediate needs also has more long-term objectives and likes to see progress being made towards them. 'Bitty' instruction further defeats the ultimate goals in that it does not force the students to develop orderly learning habits - there is no explicit need for them.

Some students are very much aware that effort is needed but they are unsure of how to harness it or direct it. Another possible source of this difficulty may lie in our efforts to explain the task to them. We are, perhaps, accustomed to teaching reading to children who accept much, and even learn much without fully understanding it. Adults find it impossible to do this. Our own knowledge of the processes involved in reading and our ability to explain them in a meaningful way may be at fault.

While children are helped by the learning environment to develop appropriate skills, adults who come to learn new skills are expected to know how to learn. Very often they have great difficultues in learning and if these can be discussed with the tutor, solutions on a practical level can be found. One such case arose from a student saying to the writer, 'it's funny, I want very badly to improve my reading. I come regularly to the class and I feel that my tutor helps me to work hard while I'm there and that we are getting somewhere. But I just can't make myself read at home and I know that this is keeping me back. It's as if I needed someone to push me all the time'. Further chat with this student, a housewife, showed that her usual practice was to try and read in bed before going to sleep at night, but she was usually too tired to do much or to remember much of what she did. The main difficulties seemed to be that of fatigue, and that of fear of being disturbed if she 'did her reading' during the day by neighbours, or by the children. Routine is a hard taskmaster, but we decided to try an experiment. Her children were all at school, so instead of tackling the housework immediately after they had all gone out in the morning, she was to sit down with a cup of tea and read her book, or whatever, for 15 minutes. This meant that she would be relatively fresh while doing it, she might get more pleasure and reinforcement from it, she would avoid the guilty feeling arising from 'doing her reading' last thing at night and she might also remember more. More important from another point of view, she was unlikely to be disturbed at a time when most of her friends would be doing their housework. This was to be tried on just two mornings for the first week so as not to disrupt the old routine too much. It was such a success however that it spread to four mornings and progress became better.

It might be useful to go into this question of where, when and how to study, and its importance with every adult literacy student. Discouragement may be caused by slowness of progress simply through the student not realising that he must put a good deal of well-directed effort into learning. Success in helping adults to read will depend in part on how we guide this effort.

Conclusions

Progress in reading and personal development was reported by tutors of their adult literacy students. A variety of reading skills were being successully taught. Some difficulties were identified as hindering progress - lack of suitable materials, inadequate support for tutors, lack of general learning skills in students. It was felt that it should be possible to devise a 'core curriculum' suitable for adults which would take advantage of the extensive grid of reference

and breadth of experience possessed by the majority of the students. Such a curriculum would give security also to the tutors and enable them to experiment more with teaching methods. Comparisons could be made between different approaches to tuition on a more controlled basis than is possible at present. The establishment of a core curriculum would also serve a purpose by clarifying objectives and sub-goals, and structuring progress. Working towards these objectives would promote the development of general learning skills without which the adult literacy student will never attain the ultimate aim of being an independent learner through independent reading.

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